where students gather to listen to records of Beethoven and Brahms, if not of Debussy and Stravinsky. Even the banks send out calendars all over the country with excellent reproductions of Renoir, Van Gogh, or Matisse. It may be debated how deeply this interest in modern Western literature and art penetrates, whether the farmer in his village has any better understanding of Goethe or Manet than his grandfather did. The fact remains that almost everywhere in Japan education has brought with it a profound respect for Western culture, and sometimes a genuine love.

This feeling has often been indiscriminate and led to a defacement of the Japanese landscape which we may find all but unpardonable, but it has not been only adulation for the West which has led to many of the changes so deplored by the foreign visitor. The Japanese woman who abandons the traditional kimono in favor of a dress is not merely imitating some Hollywood star; she is liberating herself from the nuisance of the elaborate series of robes and underrobes, unbearably hot in summer and impractical at any time of the year in the offices and busses she must cope with today. Even if she would like nothing better than to wear a kimono every day, the cost of the expensive silks makes the traditional costume a luxury which few can afford unless they have inherited them.

The face of Japan is changing every day as taste, convenience, and economic necessity dictate. Underneath the surface, at an undeniably slower pace, the moral and spiritual life of the country is undergoing similar change. The family system is breaking up, especially in the larger cities, and the traditional values associated with the family are losing ground. Divorce, for example, is now accepted (at least in Tokyo) as the alternative a woman has to an

odious marriage, although until very recently she was expected to accept the flagrant infidelity of her husband and any other indignity he might choose to inflict on her in the interest of preserving the family. It will take years for such new ideas to spread throughout the country, but even today few of the younger people share their parents' belief in the traditional views.

As far as religion goes, one would have to look very hard to find in Japan even as much fervor as exists in this country, let alone India. Although most Japanese are nominally Buddhists and are buried, for form's sake, in accordance with Buddhist ritual, real interest in the religion is comparatively unusual. If, for example, the Prime Minister of Japan were to adopt the practice of important political figures in the United States and England (and elsewhere, of course) of invoking the blessings of the Deity—any deity—on the heads of the Japanese people, he would be greeted with astonishment and possibly derision. It may seem strange that Japan, which has borrowed so much from the West, has never taken more to Christianity. There has in fact been a decline of interest in Christianity since its high point at the turn of the century when many of the intellectual leaders were devout believers in a "churchless" Protestantism. This form of Christianity has not proved satisfying to most of their descendants who, even if they remember the Bible lessons of their childhood, find in them no adequate solution to their present problems.

The people whose lives are described in *The Setting Sun* are in many ways exceptional, but they are also typical of modern Japan. Kazuko, the girl who relates the story, seems more accustomed to wearing Western clothes than kimonos, is reminded as often of

Chekhov or Balzac as of *The Tale of Genji,* and, if not fluent in any Western language, uses a variety of French and English phrases with certainty that she will be understood by everyone. At the same time, she remains unmistakably Japanese in her relations with the people around her and in her quick emotional responses to the moments of intensity in her life. Because family confidences are almost impossible (except on the rare occasions when the repressions of Japanese life are overcome by the force of intolerable emotions), Kazuko, her mother, and her brother live almost without overt communication with one another. The author, Dazai Osamu, must therefore resort to various types of flashback techniques (including a diary, letters, and a will) to create for us three-dimensional figures. And although he succeeded in lending extraordinary vividness to his characters, there is much necessarily left unsaid in this Japanese world. *The Setting Sun* owes much to European culture, but it is as Japanese a novel as can be written today, in this period when the surface and inner manifestations of Japanese life are being Westernized at very different speeds and when (to a Western reader) the Japanese literature which reflects these changes is surprising, alternately, for its closeness and remoteness to our own lives.

“Victims of a transitional period in morality” is how Kazuko styles herself and her lover, and we feel that she is right. A *modus vivendi* with Western *things* has nearly been achieved, but the full effect of Western ideas has yet to be felt. *The Setting Sun* derives much of its power from its portrayal of the ways in which the new ideas have destroyed the Japanese aristocracy. The novel created an immediate sensation when it first appeared in 1947. The phrase

“people of the setting sun,” which came to be applied, as a result of the novel, to the whole of the declining aristocracy, has now passed into common usage and even into dictionaries. Kazuko, her mother, and her brother Naoji are typical not only of the aristocracy but of the large class of Japanese who were impoverished by the war and the succeeding inflation and land reforms.

In reading the novel one cannot escape the feeling that the author, Dazai Osamu, himself was personally involved—that he was not only the story-teller but a participant. An examination of his biography tends to confirm this impression. Dazai was born in 1909 of a rich and powerful family of the north of Japan. He was brilliant in his studies at school and early showed promise of his literary talent, as well as signs of the erratic habits which were subsequently to darken his career. Before he was twenty, he twice attempted suicide. In 1930 he entered the Department of French Literature at Tokyo University. Dazai knew no French when he elected this course (and apparently, through complete neglect of his studies, never learned more than a few words), but at the time French literature was the chosen field of many young Japanese. This was partially because they found French Symbolism or Surrealism more congenial than the more matter-of-fact English literature, and far more so than the philological problems of the classical Japanese literature, and partially because of the universal credence given in Japan to legends surrounding the magical *vie de Bohème* of Paris.

Dazai withdrew from the University in 1935 without obtaining a degree. This was not surprising when one considers that he boasted of not having attended a single lecture in five years. Instead, he spent his time in literary and Left-Wing political activity. His stories